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THE CZECH REFORMATION AND ITS RELATION TO THE WORLD REFORMATION.¹

THE first and chief question which we have to discuss is whether we are justified in speaking of a special Czech Reformation, typical and distinctive as apart from the general Reformation in Europe in the 16th century ; whether the religious movement, spontaneous and national, which in the beginning of the 15th century spread rapidly over the whole of Bohemia, merits the name of Reformation—that is to say, whether it was not one vague current of the general sentiment of dissatisfaction and revolt rather than a conscious, deliberate and successful effort which resulted in clothing a new idea with a concrete form.

Such general currents of sentiment were prevailing at the end of the 14th and the beginning of the 15th centuries in many parts of Europe, among theologians and philosophers at the universities, among scholars of the Renaissance and moralists in Church and State, among politicians, and even among bishops and cardinals. In proof of this we have many writings of scholars and also actual practical efforts which at least took shape at the so-called Reform Councils, such as that of Pisa in 1409. But none of these efforts resulted in a Reformation, in the formation of a new Church, in a new theological system, in a new religious conception of the relation between God and man or in a new way of salvation.

In general history, whether ecclesiastical or secular, it has become customary to classify the Czech religious movement of the 15th century as a Pre-Reformation ; Jan Hus is regarded as a precursor of Luther and Calvin on similar lines to Petrus Waldo and John Wyclif. Certainly, Jan Hus was a pioneer of the World Reformation, and from the standpoint of the 16th century this classification is quite comprehensible. If of any historical development we take its highest expression as a

¹ Summary of a lecture delivered at King's College, London, on 28 October, 1929, for the School of Slavonic and East European Studies.

standard, then all that has led up to this summit must naturally be regarded as a mere preparation.

But the Czech religious movement is different. It shows so many of the characteristic features of a real Reformation. It is not from any national pride or prejudice that we give Jan Hus the name of a reformer, but rather it is the result of impartial scientific research.

This is the point where we must mention the relation and the difference between Jan Hus and John Wyclif. It is a commonplace known to all scholars that Hus largely derived his opinions from the writings of the Oxford scholar. This debt he confesses in terms of sincere gratitude, but it would not be right to deny any originality to the Czech Reformer. It was not only in Bohemia that Wyclif's writings were known. The question is why in Bohemia alone they found such a willing and glad response—why not in France and Germany? And why was it that even in Prague all German Professors were unanimous in rejecting the doctrine of Wyclif as heretical?

The only reasonable answer or explanation is that even before Wyclif the same or an analogous direction was to be found in the religious tendencies and theological development of Hus. Wyclif's opinions became the natural and authoritative expression of the convictions of Hus. In Hus' spiritual development Wyclif was one of the links of a chain, very important as helping to bring it to completion. Hus is not a mere copy of Wyclif; he is critical, he does not blindly follow everything that Wyclif has said, for instance, he did not agree with Wyclif's teaching on the Eucharist. Hus confessed that Wyclif had opened his eyes in many ways, but in fact he continued on the lines laid down by his own predecessors in Bohemia, who were older than Wyclif. When he first got to know Wyclif's writings, he was a mature man and had been active for several years as a teacher and preacher, in both of which capacities he had already shown that church reform was an urgent need of his time and a duty of his conscience.

Now we will go back to the question whether the religious movement in Bohemia merits the name of Reformation. What are its characteristic features? Two standards are commonly accepted by which all religious and theological currents are measured in relation to the World Reformation. One is Luther's principle of justification by faith alone; the other is the emphasis laid by Calvin on the Holy Scripture as the one and sufficient rule in religion, theology and church govern-

ment. I will venture to add a third, which I regard as important and decisive: the formation of a Church which in its religious conception, theological expression and practical organisation is different from the Medieval Church. It is this last test which distinguishes between a real Reformation and a mere movement of scientific criticism and dissatisfaction. If we take these three standards, the work of Jan Hus and his followers in the 15th century deserves the name of a Reformation.

One of the predecessors of Hus, Mathias of Jajnov, who died in 1394, wrote a voluminous work entitled: *Regulae Veteris et Novi Testamenti* (*The Rules of the Old and New Testaments*). The title of this work alone shows that about the end of the 14th century, the Holy Scripture was taken as truly a standard of religion. This clear and independent thinker personally regarded the Bible as his daily bread, his joy and strength, and as the only source of authority for the Church. In the same way Hus initiated a conscious return to the Bible, first in his commentaries for use in academic teaching and in his numerous sermons for practical application, and lastly in his criticism of the existing Church. His criticism of the ecclesiastical system of hierarchy and the many abuses in the Church are exclusively based on the Bible and on the model of the Apostolic Church as represented in it.

As to the other leading principle of the Reformation, justification by faith alone, it is true that we do not find it expressed by Hus with the emphasis of a Luther as the dominating law of the spiritual world of a Christian; but his books are full of the conviction that eternal life is the result of faith.¹ He says that faith is the beginning or the A B C of any religious teaching; without faith none can please God; salvation or rejection depend on faith or lack of faith.² The validity and efficacy of the sacrament, in the priest as well as the participant, is bound up with faith; without faith and sentiment the sacraments are not efficacious. This conception really involved the negation of the hierarchical and ecclesiastical sacramentalism which was one of the pillars of the Medieval Church, and it implied a new conception of individual religion.

The third mark of a real Reformation is that a new Church is formed. This indeed was not done by Hus, but it was a necessary consequence of his idea. For many, the Church is

¹ *Explanation of the Faith*, that is of the Apostles' Creed, *Vyklad Viry*, IX.

² *Vyklad*, XXVI.

the Body of Christ,¹ who is her Head, the Body consisting of all those who are elect. This Church is our Mother in the world, by faith alone confessing her husband and head, Christ. We have therefore to believe that not stones or carven wood, not the Pope and cardinals and all the scholars, but all the elect past, present, and future, are the Holy Catholic Church. The Pope is not God on earth,² but a sinful man. If he follows the apostolic belief and perseveres in it, he will be saved; if he lives in opposition to the life of Christ, he is not holy, but is a veritable anti-Christ.

Hus had not time to draw the practical consequences from his teaching. His followers made this next step and tried to organise a Church upon the new principles in 1419, by formulating the famous Four Articles of Prague, which contained the essence of the new conception of religion and the Church:

1. The word of God is to be preached freely by worthy priests in the same sense as the Saviour preached it.
2. All mortal sins and other iniquities against the word of God shall be punished in all classes by the Church authorities.
3. The Holy Communion must be administered and received freely *sub utraque specie*, that is, both with the bread and the wine, by all Christians who are not in mortal sin.
4. The clergy must give up the worldly dominion over States and must live according to the rule of Christ.

These articles contain in principle almost everything that was later proclaimed and practised by the Reformation: free preaching of the word of God, the chalice for the laity, abolition of a special class of clergy, with the submission of the clergy to the common laws, opposition to any temporal power or worldly dominion of the priests and the Church, and beneath all this the need of moral earnestness and the desire for a holy life. On the basis of these Articles of Prague, the Council of Basel in 1433 recognised an agreement between the Church of Rome and the Czech Utraquists or Calixtines, by which the Hussite Church was accepted as a regular member and part of the Catholic Church. The Hussites endeavoured to prove their orthodoxy and catholicity. This effort was defeated completely by Pope Pius II., who in 1462 cancelled the agreement of Basel and declared the Hussite Church to be heretical.

The Czech Reformation produced another evangelical Church with characteristic features: *Unitas Fratrum*, the Church of the:

¹ *Vykład*, XVIII. c.d.

² *Explanation of the Lord's Prayer*, XCIV. R.

Bohemian Brethren, in the middle of the 15th century, a Church deliberately opposed to any compromise with Rome, scriptural in its basis, evangelical in its faith, and practical in its religious and moral life.

The origin and existence of this Church are decisive proof that the religious movement in Bohemia led to a real Reformation. The distinctive features of this reformed Church which came into existence before the Reformation, were the faith in the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Holy Communion, without sacramentalism ; the apostolic poverty of priests, who were regarded not as priests but as simple preachers of the Gospel, leaders and counsellors of the people ; the predominance of the lay element in the administration of the Church as represented by the Elders ; a strong Church discipline and emphasis on moral purity of life ; opposition to war and violence in the State ; care for the education of every member ; the equality of all members without distinction of class and rank (" Brethren " and " Sisters ") ; mutual brotherly help and service both in spiritual and practical life.

This *Unitas Fratrum* never became the Church of the majority ; it was often persecuted also by the Utraquists ; but nevertheless it may be called the national Evangelical Church of the Czechs. It is very important to realise that the characteristic features of this *Unitas Fratrum* were not lost even in the great movement of the Lutheran and Calvinistic Reformations. After reformed churches of these two types were introduced into Bohemia, the *Unitas Fratrum* continued to exist and later, through Count Nicholas Zinzendorf in Herrnhut, to influence the Lutheran Church as well as the Calvinistic. This is my chief reason for thinking that we are entitled to speak of a special Czech Reformation and to maintain that this Czech Reformation has a place of its own in history.

What distinguished the Czech Reformation from the Lutheran and the Calvinistic types ? The theology of the *Unitas Fratrum* was not quite original nor clear in theory, though it was always biblical and evangelical, but its conception of faith and piety always had a special shade and colour of its own. Inspired by the central truths of Christianity, the faith of the Brethren was not a formal belief in a system of dogmas ; it was rather the inward and unreserved confidence of the human soul in God, in the consciousness of His Fatherhood, and faithful obedience to His law. From this came the all-importance of the new inward life in God before God and the law of service to man in active

brotherly love, with the aim of establishing God's kingdom upon earth.

The dogmatic differences which in the 16th century led to the division into two different types of churches were known to the Brethren, but they were conscious that these differences on single points of doctrine must never be allowed to overshadow the initial and final unity of Christianity. The Brethren always had an earnest desire to overcome the differences between churches and to arrive at a higher spiritual and organic unity in sincerity of faith and love.

In 1529 Luther and Zwingli separated in Marburg and the Reformation was split into two branches: in 1535 the Brethren of Bohemia formulated their belief in a conciliatory way, and the *Confessio Bohemica* of 1575 bears the same character, putting in the foreground of religion that which is common and unifying and trying to find a common foundation for all the different churches of the country.

This, besides the practical application of Christianity, is the other main characteristic feature of the Czech Reformation as embodied in the *Unitas Fratrum*: the tendency towards the unity of Christendom without any uniformity. The *Confessio Bohemica* of 1575 was proclaimed in 1609 as the common foundation of faith for all evangelical churches in Bohemia, which agreed to have one administration and to form practically one visible Church, but maintained the independence and autonomy of each individual Church with its typical special features.¹ In relation to other communions, brotherly love and service, tolerance and a passion for Christian unity were cultivated among the Bohemian Brethren at a time when all around them reigned not only a fanatical fight of the Church of Rome against Protestantism, but also a fierce struggle between Protestant churches of different confessions.²

This peaceful development met with a terrible interruption in the outbreak of the Thirty Years War in 1619. The Churches of the Reformation in Bohemia were suppressed. The *Unitas Fratrum* was dead. But its secret adherents continued to satisfy

¹ The same tendency achieved the same result in the *Consensus Sandomiriensis* in Poland in 1570, not without active support and help from the Bohemian exiles.

² The spirit of tolerance and the striving for Christian unity found eloquent expression in the Conference of Faith and Order in Lausanne in 1927. This was a practical application of the emphasis on the social aspect of Christianity at the Conference of Life and Work held in Stockholm in 1925.

their spiritual hunger from the treasures of the past—the Bible, the hymns and writings of Hus and the works of Comenius. When in 1781 Joseph II. proclaimed a partial religious tolerance, the remnants of the Reformation declared that their faith was the Faith of the Lamb, the Lamb being the symbol of the *Unitas*, but the *Confessio Bohemica* was not allowed to them. They had to choose between the *Confessio Augustana* and the *Confessio Helvetica*, and they instituted two churches, a reformed Calvinistic and a Lutheran. These confessions of faith were the protecting shield of the Czech Protestants from 1781 to 1918. Through them the small churches of Bohemia were able to enter into organic connection with world Protestantism. But sub-consciously and consciously they continued to cling to the religion of their fathers. Some years before 1915, when the Czech Protestants were preparing for the 500th anniversary of Hus' martyrdom, there was revealed a unanimous longing in the conscience of many to go back to their first foundations and to unite the two Churches into one of a native character.

By the pressure of the World War, these plans were postponed, but not frustrated. As soon as the bloodless revolution of 28 October, 1918, had brought about the creation of an independent State of Czechoslovakia, both the Czech Churches merged into one spontaneously and unanimously on 18 December, 1918, and took the name of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren. This was not merely an external union between two churches, but rather a new creation based on historical foundations. In the fundamental document of its constitution this church expressed its indebtedness to the *Confessio Helvetica* and the *Confessio Augustana*, and declared its adherence not to the letter but to the spirit of the Confession of the Brethren of 1535 and the *Confessio Bohemica* of 1575. This Church maintains its organic connection with the Presbyterian world. It is evangelical in its profession and practice, tolerant but consciously Protestant in relation to other communities. It is a special type of reformed Church like the Waldensian Church in Italy, bearing the marks of its native origin in the unity of faith and dogma, of piety and practice in the living hope and expectation of, and work for, the kingdom of God, following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. Churches must have a clear, scientific, dogmatic system, but their first and last duty is to maintain and proclaim that which is more than dogmatic expression, the new life derived from the spirit of God and brotherly love toward all members of the spiritual body.

The Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren in Czechoslovakia is not the only product of the Czech Reformation. Bohemia gave to the world another gift in the shape of the Moravian Church, constituted by Zinzendorf out of refugees of Czech and Moravian origin. The existence of this Church is another proof that the Czech Reformation had a distinct origin and permanent place in the World-Reformation. Otherwise, how would it be possible that this handful of simple people were able to maintain their existence in Great Britain and America, with a characteristic type of piety, with missions all over the world which gave an initiative and example in the mission field to other churches. The Moravian Church has still distinct marks of its Czech origin in Church discipline, in constitution, and chiefly in its conception of faith and piety and practical Christianity; it is a small but œcumenical and universal Church whose spiritual influence has been and is still felt in other churches.

There is a mutual interdependence between the churches of the Reformation. The idea of the Christian Church is a lofty ideal, not an illusion though not at present a reality. Christianity is so rich that it cannot be comprehended and exhausted by a single conception. Even in the Bible we already have distinct types of religion—Paul, John and James see the same Christ from different angles. In this variety of forms, types and expressions, the Czech Reformation and its offsprings have a special colour of their own. The world has learned a great deal from Augustine and Anselm, Luther and Calvin, from Zinzendorf and Wesley: through these Jan Hus, Peter Chelčický and John Amos Comenius speak their message to mankind. Now the world is beginning to pay attention to these original voices: the writings of Hus, Chelčický and Comenius are being translated into German, French and English, and for many foreign readers these writings are a discovery. A universal, truly Catholic Christianity with peaceful and social aims is strikingly and forcefully expressed in these old books. This is a contribution of the Czech Reformation to the spiritual treasures of mankind.

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